Ronald Gray – interview transcript

Interviewer: Payam Hosseinian

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Theatre-goer. Alfie Bass; Samuel Beckett; Berliner Ensemble; Italian opera; King Lear; Look Back in Anger; Mother Courage; Old Vic; Laurence Olivier; Paul Robeson; Saturday Night Theatre; Shakespeare; Soviet cinema; Theatre Workshop; Unity Theatre; Orson Welles.

PH: Here we go. For the beginning, Mr Gray…

RG: Ron.

PH: - Ron, thank you - Could you talk about the moments you had first with theatre: your first contact with theatre and your first experience of theatre.

RG: My first experience of theatre… well, it's… my first experience of theatre must have been radio theatre. As I previously recalled, it was a question of every Saturday night we had to be quiet, and my mother would say, 'It's theatre night'. And the BBC had a series called Saturday Night Theatre. And, so… it was just a habit, really. And I guess sometimes I must have enjoyed what I was hearing. I suppose I was about… well, I was in my teens, I suppose. And sometimes I was probably bored and went off into another room with some reading or something. But it must have been the BBC choice of plays, 'cause they had some - I think they had, I think they emphasised popular theatre. I have no memory of any specific play, but must have…

PH: But, kind of popular?

RG: Yes, I mean… then again, it must have been not a bit like broadcast theatre today, because actors then were - the English that the BBC approved of … was upper class, standard… not even standard really but a throttled sort of speech that the BBC thought was suitable for the masses, you know.

PH: That's right, yeah.

RG: And it would be interesting to play back recordings of BBC plays because by today's standards they'd be horribly ancient and antiquated. Otherwise, I must say I was taken

to the theatre a few times, I remember most going to a pantomime which was put on at the end, at the Palace Pier theatre which was a pier - Brighton Palace Pier. And it was quite exciting to go there and know that the sea was underneath the audience as the pantomime played. That was a quite exciting outing, I remember. I don't remember any sort of formal theatre-going otherwise, and my first visit to a theatre must have been while I was in the army, 19… 41. I was… after training in Yorkshire we were waiting to go abroad and… we were posted to Watford and I must have seen a play or two at a theatre there. Then again, it's all gone. Now, when we got to… I ended up the war, or rather I began the war - the actual war - in Italy. I was in the Italian campaign from start to finish. And there I managed to visit three opera houses, and I'd never obviously been to an opera before.

PH: What then?

RG: So I was able to go as the war crept up Italy and we liberated one part after another, long hard slog, I managed to get to a… eventually I got to the Fenice Theatre. The famous Fenice Theatre in Venice, where Boris Gudonov was being played. And it was extraordinary! I mean, this was 1945 and the company must have been playing to Nazi audiences, I suppose, so it was the full company… amazing number of people on the stage. And with real horses coming on the stage. So it was amazing to think that this had gone on through the war with all its grandeur. And in this beautiful Fenice Theatre which was later burned down - they say it was burned down deliberately by the Mafia. So the Mafia would get the contract for the new theatre. And I saw another opera, Lucia di Lammermoor, at a provincial theatre - provincial opera house - that must have been about 1944. And another opera, which I've forgotten the name of…

PH: So, mostly operas?

RG: Yes. Strangely, while we were in Egypt, the Polish ballet company suddenly appeared in the middle of the desert and I saw ballet for the first time.

PH: Strange place for watching ballet!

RG: Yes, to see all these soldiers in their desert gear, sitting on the sand watching these Polish ballet dancers. And, I mean, there's a big story behind that, because Stalin had been utterly brutal to the Poles, but he allowed General Anders to form a… army and allowed it to leave the Soviet Union and fight with the Allies in Egypt. And they fought very bravely in Italy and of course they brought with them their ballet company, amazingly! [Laughs]

PH: Ron, about your first experience of Old Vic. The first play you watched at Old Vic.

RG: Ah, the Old Vic. The first play. Now, the Old Vic company… the Old Vic theatre is a wonderful theatre, but that was bombed during the war so the company had to find a new theatre. It found the New Theatre in the West End. And, in my last… I spent the

last few years in the army: I had served seven years because I'd volunteered. If I'd waited to be called up I would have been out of the army in 1945, but I had to serve another two years, so I went back to Italy, did another year there. And finally demob day arrived and I spent my last days in Woolwich barracks. From there I was able to take a tube to the West End and I would book a stool… I would queue for tickets, you could buy a, pay sixpence for a stool and the stool would mark your place in the queue for tickets at the Old Vic. And there were always queues. In 1947 they had a terrific reputation, and the company had Laurence Olivier, Alec Guinness… any number of famous actors. It was a remarkable company. And so, this is my first real big theatrical experience, there's no doubt about it. To queue up there, a soldier still in uniform, and end up in the gods at the New Theatre, and there's the Old Vic company in its glorious days. And to see King Lear there, why… the impact that made is like your story of seeing Hamlet for the first time. It set you back, you know, and you wonder what you'd been missing. People who don't make that discovery, I feel so sorry for them - they're missing out on a great lifetime experience. If it doesn't happen to them, then too bad.

PH: You mentioned Laurence Olivier and Alec Guinness…

RG: Alec Guinness, oh yes, but he was unknown at the time, more or less.

PH: But Olivier was famous at that time?

RG: Oh yes, everybody knew him, because he'd already made these two films. Hamlet and he made Henry V, which was, they emphasised the patriotic element in that play: 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more'. You know, during the war [Laughs] was absolutely right, and Laurence Olivier's voice reeling out from the screen. 'We will fight!' - echoing Churchill's 'we will fight them on the beaches'. So it had tremendous kudos for Olivier, that film, and suddenly everybody knew around the world - Allied world anyway - about his prestige and talent. And then he appeared in several other plays.

PH: At the Old Vic?

RG: At the Old Vic, yes. I can't reel them all off, but I've got a book there about all the productions, in 1947, 48. And I must have seen at least half of those, I suppose. A great experience, really. And from then on, Shakespeare wasn't 'somebody everybody just knew about', but somebody meaningful in my life. I was ready to see other Shakespeare plays.

PH: It was a deep matter for you? It was a deep matter for you rather than something shallow, just…?

RG: Yes, yes, and I mean, King Lear in particular, I mean, I'm now his age, you know. And I know how [Laughs] I've lived through not Lear's experiences, but I've made it through a war and I know what happens. But I… during the war I saw one of the Nazi

atrocities; I mean, I didn't see it actually happen but I saw the aftermath. And this is the famous Ardeatine Caves massacre, which took place in the, on the outskirts of Rome. The partisan forces in Italy trapped, err, ambushed some SS soldiers who were marched through the streets at exactly the same time everyday. So they laid in wait for them and a bomb went up and killed some of these SS soldiers. Hitler immediately said, 'I want ten dead Roman citizens for every German killed.'! And they just rounded up people and took them to the caves - a whole film was made about it, it was Richard Burton playing the SS officer… who was a very cultured SS man, who greatly appreciated Italian art but at the same time was an absolutely ruthless SS murderer, you know. But I used to take the army news, well… saw the army newspaper one day. We were stationed just outside Rome for a week or two. And I read the headline 'Ardeatine caves massacre unearthed' and I… there, I was always curious in the army, I always wanted to get beyond the official viewpoint of everything. And I hitchhiked out to the Ardeatine caves, and there was an Italian guard on, outside this barbed wire fence. And I went up to him, I said, 'Possible entrare, qui?' He said, 'Ah, non non non non!' And I said, 'oh, por favore' and I offered him a packet of cigarettes and [snaps fingers] I was in. And the Red Cross, they'd all gone off to lunch, and I remember being the only person there. And I went into these caves, deep into this tunnel, and eventually I saw the bodies, 335 victims of the Nazis. Now, that's something that you don't forget. That… I mean, at that time there was a lot of propaganda about the evil of Fascism and Nazis, but not a lot of proof: the big concentration camps - Auschwitz - hadn't been liberated yet. So this was an early example of Nazi atrocities. And it was a real shock, you know. So immediately I wrote home, saying what I'd seen. And my officer who censored all the letters said, 'I'm sorry, Gray, you can't send this letter. It's not official.' I said, 'Well, excuse me sir, it's something I've seen with my own eyes, it's a Nazi atrocity, it's something I think the people at home should know about it.'. He said, 'Well, I'm sorry Gray, I cannot permit you to.'. So, this shows the state of mind of officialdom then, who couldn't accept the Nazis for what they were, yet. It's extraordinary.

PH: Let's…

RG: Get back to theatre! [Laughs]

PH: No, it's all right. Let's go to Unity Theatre.

RG: Yes, one of the most… one who made the most impression on me was Mae Zetterling. Swedish actress, who'd been in a film that got very good reviews, called Frenzy, I think it was. Beautiful actress. She was appearing in Ibsen's… oh dear…

PH: The Doll's House?

RG: Oh, wait a minute, my mind's gone blank. Anyway, she came in and said, 'By the way, do you have any books on Ibsen? I'm very interested because I'm in the play.'. I said, 'I've got just the thing for you.'. And I produced a scarce American publication called Dialectics, and it was called Ibsen, Mehring… anyway, it was an interesting and controversial view of Ibsen. Anyway, she was delighted. Lovely actress, though. And

then she became an independent filmmaker, very intelligent, productions of… films came from her. Other actors, yes…

PH: From Unity Theatre?

RG: Yes. Oh back to Unity Theatre. Ah. Yes. Well. Now I… yes, I did say I was quite radicalised by the war. And when I discovered there was a Left-wing theatre in north London I… I was quite fascinated. And it was a very run-down place, there was no facilities to talk of. But it was a working class theatre. And an extraordinary number of people who were to become famous began in this amateur theatre. It was always amateur, no professionals. But the man who was running it ran on, went on to be an absolute essential part of the development of theatre in Britain, in later years. He was involved in the, the Royal Court, oh dear… and he became, behind Woodfall films. All the famous people of the Fifties and Sixties appeared one way or another at Unity or the Royal Court. Unity put on plays by Jean-Paul Sartre, and they were the first plays that I saw by Sartre, Maxim Gorky… A famous play, Left-wing play called Waiting For Lefty, which was very successful in America, that came over here. In the thirties, Paul Robeson came over and appeared in a play by a black writer. And one of his… one of the young actors at the time was Alfie Bass. Now, Alfie Bass was a marvellous Cockney actor who became a great success in television, and in the theatre. And he… one day his car broke down, right opposite the bookshop. And he came over and said, 'Hello, my name's Alfie Bass, my car's broken…' and I said, 'Oh, Alfie, good, do come up and have a cup of tea.'. And so, I… Unity theatre came up and we chatted away. And at that time Paul Robeson had been - had his passport taken away by the FBI. Of course he was campaigning against racism in the United States. And Alfie said oh he had been… instrumental in arranging for a concert in the Shaw theatre in Euston Road, which was to urge the returning of the passport to Paul Robeson. And Paul Robeson was connected by radio and sung over the line to this packed audience. And Alfie said that he'd had to introduce Paul to the audience. And he said that it was such an emotional occasion 'cause he'd been on the stage with him all those years before. There's a whole list of, Michael Gambon used to be in - I mean, one of our greatest actors now, he's constantly in films and TV and stage - he began there as an amateur actor. I've got a whole list of names, somewhere. And there was a Left-wing viewpoint of all these plays that would challenge the sort of stuff, the conservativism of the time. And they preceded the Royal Court, which began to put on explosive plays like Look Back in Anger you know and…

PH: Could you please talk about Look Back in Anger.

RG: Look Back in Anger… yes… it's, it's difficult to conjure up, Look Back in Anger. I mean, the film is more vivid in my memory than the play. But the play, I suppose the striking thing about that was the actress was onstage doing the ironing and the washing-up. [Laughs] As well as, as well as the… leading character shooting his mouth off about stuff in Britain and how it all used to be better than it was. But it was, you know, there's no doubt that it was an original play that shook up the theatre. No doubt about that, the impact that it made.

PH: And at that time you felt the impact of this piece on society?

RG: [Pause] Yes, it led to this idea of the Angry Young Men. And the Angry Young Men, well, most of them deny that they were Angry Young Men! It was a media… tag, really. Convenient one. And it embraced writers… and dramatists. But it definitely expressed a change, a mood of change: after all there's a whole generation who'd been in the war, and they'd come back from the war and they wanted things to change. And put in a Labour government, and things weren't really changing. The old elite was still there, everywhere: in the BBC, in the theatre, the establishment - the establishment still dominated Britain. It still does today. It won't go away. [Laughs] But it got a good shaking, you see, for some years. And that's why Mrs Thatcher was such a determined lady. She was going to crush all the advances that had been made, all the people who made life uncomfortable for Conversatives. So Look Back in Anger yes, it's one of the signals really to… to Britain, that a lot of us weren't very happy. And wanted things to change. And they didn't very much and they haven't very much. Unhappily. Here we are right in the middle of another bloody colonial war, for oil. British soldiers, British soldiers have never stopped dying since 1945. And people forget that. The army has always been somewhere in the world shooting at people. At people who don't want us there. That sums up a lot of complex history. It does. British soldiers are dying, have been dying and dying and as an ex-soldier I've always been aware of that. Young men, out there, trained to kill. And they go out, they go out to kill. It's a fat lot asking them to be soldiers, to be policemen I mean. They're sent out there today with guns and tanks and tremendous firepower… to solve solutions that can only be helped - solved - politically. Politically. Politics. Even Churchill said 'jaw-jaw is better than war-war', and that, if only people would listen, our politicians, and then Mr Blair would be reminded that Churchill said jaw-jaw's better than war-war.

PH: Ron, before we started the interview you mentioned Orson Welles.

RG: Orson Welles. Yes. Well he, no doubt he, I suppose he woke me. I'd seen hundreds - anybody my age'd seen hundreds and hundreds of Hollywood films. And there's no doubt about it, they're absolute geniuses at entertaining people. And they entertained people all around the world. But behind all those films there is this idea that their… is always lurking there that their way of life is the only way of life, which shows in all those films. With a few honourable exceptions that question the American Dream. And Orson Welles questioned the American Dream with Citizen Kane. Now, seeing that film it… just sort of liberated me, really, from [Laughs] the 'Hollywood dream'; that's what it… somebody - a woman called Powdermaker I think it was - wrote a book called The Hollywood Dream, I think it was.

PH: Did it have a kind of impact on, in those days on British theatre, cinema, and people, professional audiences of theatre…

RG: I think it must have done, you know. Anybody in… in the creative world shall we say who saw Citizen Kane would look at cinema differently from that day on, to see what was possible. I mean lots of things we accept today without any surprise whatsoever were first done by Orson Welles in Citizen Kane. He found (a marvellous thing it was) he found a cameraman who'd been itching for years and years to break out of the Hollywood mould and use a camera in a different way, in a creative way. And

Orson Welles and him come together and [snaps fingers] I've forgotten the man's name. Oh dear! And you got this incredible inventive creative film that used film in a way nobody else had used it. But Welles must have seen all the, the Soviet films - Eisenstein and Pudovkin - who in their way saw theatre as something creative, not… well, under the Communist system, not out for profit, for propaganda. I mean, nevertheless - despite the propaganda element, at least creative people amazingly got these films made and the… the other great films changed the way people looked at cinema and Orson Welles must have been one of them.

PH: Yeah, definitely, definitely. Ron, can we… of course we're coming back to theatre and foreign theatres. Influence of French theatre and German theatre on British theatre.

RG: Ah, yes. Well, the Lyric at Hammersmith, it brought in Arthur Miller's All My Sons - wonderful anti-war play. Arthur Miller too was another brave, creative dramatist.

PH: Death of a Salesman?

RG: Yes, Death of a Salesman. Now, I saw Paul Muni, who was a great Hollywood star, who played political characters in films, in Hollywood. And he also played Scarface, a really chilling picture of an American gangster. Then he came over here, and I rushed off - I'd seen all those films and I rushed off to the West End and saw… Death of a Salesman. Now there, there's a play could be seen over and over again, and I must have seen it half a dozen times - with different actors - and it's such a marvellous play. Sorry, what did you ask me?

PH: About the foreign influences, for example...

RG: Oh, foreign films.

PH: No, no, foreign theatre as in plays. For example, Brecht.

RG: Brecht. Well...

PH: Or Miller, as you say.

RG: The first Brecht play I saw must have been at the Unity Theatre. See, Brecht, Britain was typically a long time… recognising the importance and power of Brecht plays. In fact the chap who'd… who'd been instrumental behind Unity Theatre and Royal Court, he flew to Berlin and persuaded Brecht to allow a performance of Mother Courage in Britain. I think Joan Littlewood put it on at her theatre.

PH: Theatre Workshop.

RG: Yes. It was a flop. But it was the first professional production of a Brecht play in Britain. Mother Courage. And we had to wait ages before we saw any other plays. I mean, the other works of his, the Kurt Weill productions, Mahagonny and…

PH: Caucasian Chalk Circle.

RG: Caucasian Chalk Circle, those began to appear and made an impact. But the real, the real impact was the arrival in London of - in 1956, I think it was - of the Berliner Ensemble. Brecht had just died but Britain had allowed this company [Laughs] from Eastern Germany, remember, height of the Cold War. You have to remember the political background.

PH: And, about…

RG: It comes to London and puts on Mother Courage and two other plays. And almost the entire theatrical profession went to see these Brecht plays, and it was a revolution in the theatre. Everybody says so. I'd never seen, the whole thing, the acting, the music, the décor, the… everything about it was a unity and perfection of play.

PH: What about Beckett?

RG: Err, Beckett, now…

PH: For example, Waiting For Godot.

RG: Yes, Waiting For Godot.

PH: You first… did you see the first production of Waiting For Godot?

RG: No, no, I think it was some years before… I mean, I've seen it several times, you know and it… I'm… of course it's the great classic. And because it's a great classic you get the very best actors and people behind it. And there's something marvellous and utterly unique about it. And it got me on to reading Beckett and listening… there's one or two other actors who… absolute genius at portraying Beckett's characters. Oh dear. Names keep evading me, of course… but Beckett well done and done by people who understand him is… an experience, I must say. Because I think Beckett is shown as a great pessimistic playwright but what he's showing is the courage of people at the bottom… right through all his work, I mean he himself moved among these literary circles in Paris and knew everybody and yet his sympathies are there with people there at the bottom, with the underdogs, and I think that's the biggest challenge to playwrights and actors. To portray people who've got no way of expressing themselves and to put them on the stage and make them meaningful and give them a language - a

speech - that really they themselves are incapable of. And to make that believable and hold the attention of audiences, I think that is the biggest challenge of all. Anybody could – well, I say not anybody could! Any good playwright could write about cultured, intelligent, educated people, and most of the plays are. But I mean Shakespeare, often he chose to speak, or to allow a soldier to speak, or people that are servants, at the bottom. Bottom of the pile. They're the people that have the voice. My hero, in Shakespeare, in Shakespeare's plays, is the man in King Lear who's just… all his life he's just served his prince, as a servant and soldier. And always obeyed orders. When Lear's eyes are about to be put out, he says, 'Stop!'. And his master turns on him and attacks, kills him, but the servant reacts and plunges his sword into the master, who dies, presently. I mean, somebody with no voice suddenly expressing himself, 'No, I don't want this old man's eyes put out.' And I think that's the most extraordinary thing. 'Cause in the drama of the action, you can lose that, you know. But it's there, forever. Somebody revolting, saying nay. And I think that's so important.

PH: Ron, let me ask a question about Joan Littlewood. Theatre Workshop. About the style they used in those days.

RG: Yes, well, I wish I could comment intelligently about that, but I could only do that if I'd seen a lot of productions. But the very fact as I said earlier, they're out there in the East End and in those days it was a different world, the East End, wasn't it, you had to journey outside into the real London. [To his wife] And we did get to see two or three productions, do you remember dear? Do you remember what we saw there?

Mrs Gray: Behan's The Hostage. Several Sean O'Casey plays. It's a while back now.

RG: And the style, well…

PH: Taste of Honey?

Mrs Gray: Yes.

RG: You were very aware it's a… popular theatre, I mean, people's theatre. It wasn't a stuffy, West End theatre, was it? I mean, there was some local, I mean, Joan Littlewood hoped to pull in all the local people in the East End. Well, to what extent she succeeded I don't know, but I wonder if it appears in her book. But half the audience of course would have travelled in, and would have been the usual theatre people … theatre audiences, don't you think?

Mrs Gray: Yeah.

RG: Yes. But there's always a vivacity you could see and that sense of dedication in the company. You can detect that, I think, in the theatre. You know sometimes you go to the theatre and you think oh, they know all their words by heart and they're reeling

them off and they give a perfunctory bow at the end and then it's all over and forgotten. But there you feel at the end of every production, performance, Joan Littlewood probably gave them a lecture or asked them, 'Can't you do it better next time?'. Always that sense that…

PH: Correcting them.

RG: Ambitious, dedication. I mean, there's that sense of dedication to the theatre. They're a company where the actors get to know each other, their weaknesses and strengths. And it adds something very vital to theatre.

PH: Theatre wasn't only just a job for them.

RG: Not just a job - obviously not, there's a sort of crusade. It comes out in her book, Joan's Book, it's a lovely book. She couldn't ask for some… But it's so sad that the end of her life… I mean she wanted a bigger, more popular theatre. Did she try the Roundhouse?

Mrs Gray: Yes, yes.

RG: Yes she did, didn't she? She hoped to reach people. The Roundhouse had a series of experimental theatres there, and they all run into the ground for one reason or another. It's an awkward part of London.

Mrs Gray: There's terrible acoustics.

RG: Terrible acoustics, yes.

RG: Yes, you see we saw a wonderful, we saw… we saw Bob Hoskins in a marvellous…

Mrs Gray: The Changeling.

RG: The Changeling. That was a wonderful production. And then a wonderful company arrived from Russia.

Mrs Gray: Oh yes, Rusdavilli.

RG: Rusdavilli company.

Mrs Gray: He did a…

RG: It was sort of a Rock, a Rock version…of classic play.

Mrs Gray: Yes, which Shakespeare was it?

RG: Of a classic play. It was…

Mrs Gray: It was a Shakespeare.

RG: It was electrifying.

Mrs Gray: Very audacious.

RG: It was all in Georgian or Russian or whatever and the impact was tremendous, wasn't it?

PH: I'd really love to ask about your experience as a practical person in theatre.

RG: A practical person?

PH: I mean… I can feel you love theatre. Have you ever tried to get engaged practically with it? With acting?

RG: Not at all, no, no!

Mrs Gray: Too busy.

RG: Too busy, yes, you must remember…

Mrs Gray: Full-time bookseller.

PH: So, being busy was the reason, therefore…

RG: Well, no. If you ask me, well, no, I think my personality… I don't think I would have survived, I'm not tough enough! [Laughs] OK, I've been in the war, I've been a soldier for seven years, I'm not tough enough to go into this turmoil.

Mrs Gray: You're also not a team player, you're very much an individualist, yes?

RG: It might be that. Yes, it might be, difficulty in… on the other hand, we ran a team.

Mrs Gray: A very tiny team, but you were the boss!

RG: Yes, I suppose so.

Mrs Gray: You were the director, all the time.

RG: Now I, yes, I'm fascinated by the theatre and the people in it, they're great, I don't know, servants of culture. Without them, life would be bleak, my God, yes! I would've… topped myself ages ago I think. [Laughs]

Mrs Gray: Every Saturday he's… he gets up and his lights up and he says 'what are we going to see today?' And… a real feeling of loss if we haven't any theatre booked for a Saturday. Totally 'Oh dear, no theatre! What, no theatre?'.

RG: Yes, it's much better than drugs or booze. [Laughs] I'm sure I get my highs really far greater than the conventional way of getting highs.

PH: Ron, I do believe that you are a kind of living history of that period, I do believe it and…

RG: Well, I wish I…

PH: And that's really a treasure.

RG: I'm glad to hear it, good.

PH: It's really a treasure and I don't know to be honest how to thank you for this manner of openness and things like that. And that was great for me, I really enjoyed it.

RG: Oh that's splendid, I'm glad to hear that. That's, and it's been a great pleasure for me to just… rabbit on.

PH: Have you got anything you'd like to add about anything you'd like to… add? Personal experiences, anything, you want to add?

RG: Yes, when you say talk about participation, what I have… the point is I'm basically a rather shy person and in social situations I'd really rather not be there, frankly! [Laughs] And you know, I can manage when we do get together with different people.

Mrs Gray: With difficulty!

RG: But I'm always thinking could my time be better spent with a book, or all these tapes I've got of radio plays, and great music and marvellous interviews. Significant, significant BBC interviews or political matters. And the point is, I've been a bookseller for fifty, sixty years - it meant I met a lot of very intelligent people, that was the good thing about it. I mean, we concentrated on supplying university libraries with out of print books. And so we had streams of librarians coming from all over the world. And at one point Japanese, and you know suddenly people who I'd regarded as enemies, Germans and Japanese… they started visiting our bookshop and I had to accept that.

Mrs Gray: Time is running out, but you must just tell the story about the Japanese customer who went to, who was in theatre...

RG: Oh, in theatre?

Mrs Gray: Came to see us to buy books, and went to the theatre every single day he was in London. And the day after, he would come to see us everyday, and he would say, he would give the number…

RG: Oh, yes. One day he came in, and he was an actor who became a university professor, and while he was in Britain he represented his tutor - another professor who's a leading authority of George Bernard Shaw - in Japan. And so he was constantly looking out for books about George Bernard Shaw, anything at all that his mentor in Japan didn't have. So one day he came, suddenly, to… we didn't have an open door, you had to ring a bell to get to our warehouse. The bell rang and at the door was this young man.

Mrs Gray: Casually dressed.

RG: Amazingly young, all these Japanese professors, that was the impressive thing. And he said, 'Oh, good morning, I understand you have books about George Bernard Shaw?'. I said, 'Yes, we do, come on in.'. 'Oh thank you,' he said, 'Oh!' because of course we had a quarter of a million books in our warehouse. Half a million, I think. Anyway, I took him to the George Bernard Shaw selection, and there are about three or four hundred books there, all about Shaw. And he turned to me and he threw his arms around me and he said, 'Oh, so lovely to see!'. And I thought, you know, Japanese have got a reputation for being…

Mrs Gray: Undemonstrative.

RG: Undemonstrative, yes.

Mrs Gray: He was a lovely man.

RG: Lovely man. And he would come in, came in almost every day.

Mrs Gray: For weeks.

RG: Yes, for weeks, looking through them, reading some of them, carefully putting some aside. And the pile grew and grew and grew. And then he would come in the morning and say, 'One hundred and sixty-four!'. I said 'I'm sorry?' He said, 'One hundred, sixty-four plays I have seen now, in Britain.' He said 'I go every day.' And the next day he would arrive and say 'One hundred and sixty-five.' [Laughs] And one day he came in and said 'One hundred and sixty-seven.' I said 'No, no, it's one hundred and sixty-six.' He said 'No, I saw two plays yesterday.'! [Laughs] It was lovely to meet people like that, to feel that you are helping them in their careers and profession. Marvellous. And then Germans… You see, I thought, well 'God! I'll never be able to talk to a German again in my life'. But then these intelligent young people used to arrive and I thought 'well, he couldn't have been much… didn't know much about what his dad got up to in the Gestapo, so…' [Laughs]. So I tolerated, got to be civilized with the Germans again.

PH: Thank you, thank you so very much.

RG: Pleasure.